
CANCER FACTS

National Cancer Institute • National Institutes of Health

Questions and Answers About Finding Cancer Support Groups

People with cancer and their families face many challenges that may leave them feeling overwhelmed, afraid, and alone. Sometimes it can be difficult to cope with these challenges or to talk to even the most supportive family and friends. However, members of the health care team and support groups can help the person feel less alone and can improve their ability to deal with the uncertainties and challenges cancer brings.

1. How can support groups help?

People with cancer sometimes find they need assistance coping with the emotional as well as the practical aspects of their disease. In fact, attention to the emotional burden of having cancer is sometimes part of a patient's treatment plan. Cancer support groups are designed to provide a confidential atmosphere where cancer patients or cancer survivors can discuss the challenges that accompany the illness with others who may be having similar experiences. For example, people gather to discuss the emotional needs created by cancer, to exchange information about their disease, including practical problems such as getting to and from treatment or managing side effects, and to share their feelings. Support groups have helped thousands of people cope with these and similar situations.

2. Can family members and friends participate in support groups?

Family and friends are also affected when cancer touches someone they love. In addition to supporting the person with cancer, family members and friends may need help in dealing with stresses such as family disruptions, financial worries, and changing roles within the family. To help meet these needs, some support groups are designed just for family members of people with cancer; other groups encourage families and friends to participate with the patient.

3. How can people find support groups?

Many organizations offer support groups for individuals with cancer and family members or friends of those who are ill. The doctor, nurse, or hospital social worker will have information about support groups, such as their location, size, type, and how

often they meet. Moreover, most hospitals have social services departments that provide information about cancer support programs. Many newspapers carry a special health supplement containing information about where to find support groups.

4. What types of support groups are available?

There are several kinds of support groups to meet individual needs. Support groups may be led by a professional, such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, or social worker, or by other patients. These groups may be for a particular disease (for example, for prostate cancer patients), for teens or young adults, for family members, or for more general support. Many groups are free, but some require a fee (check to see if insurance will cover the cost). In addition, support groups can vary in approach, size, and how often they meet. It is important that individuals find an atmosphere that they are comfortable with and meets their individual needs.

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Sources of National Cancer Institute Information

Cancer Information Service

Toll-free: 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)

TTY (for deaf and hard of hearing callers): 1-800-332-8615

NCI Online

Internet

Use <http://www.cancer.gov> to reach NCI's Web site.

CancerMail Service

To obtain a contents list, send e-mail to cancermail@icicc.nci.nih.gov with the word "help" in the body of the message.

CancerFax® fax on demand service

Dial 301-402-5874 and listen to recorded instructions.

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